154

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Those Who Fear Mind Control in Future Should Look Hard Now—at Television

MIND CONTROL is one of the sharpest ethical challenges of biological research. Certain kinds of experiments are guaranteed to make headlines, for example, when an animal's behavior is controlled by an electronic device connected to his brain.

In fact, we are all born with such devices, even more wonderful in their complexity than the products of engineering design. These are our eyes and ears, and we ought to be focusing our concerns more sharply on the mind control that is constantly exercised through them, expecially by the electronic marvel of television.

The current turmoil over this issue centers, in part, on the relationship between television programing and violence. There is certainly very little scientific evidence to prove whether or not the violence of the theater (of which TV is a part) has any net effect either way on the behavior of its audience.

Eactly the same must be said for various kinds of obscenity, like pornography. And in both areas we must be very careful that any remedy not be far worse than the disease by stifling artistic expression. We face the same dilemma in thinking about any controls over the reporting of factual news, which may be far more insturmental in the contagion of violence.

THIS CONTAGION certainly not the intention of TV programing, which complicates both the analysis of and judgment about its effects. There is no such ambiguity in the purposes of TV advertising, and if this does not work in selling cigarettes, many shrewd people must be called either frauds or fools, because they make their living on that proposition.

It is not quite fair to lay the health burden of 50,000 deaths per year from lung cancer on the television industry. A more rational approach would be to license the sale (and use) of cigarettes so that they were available only to those already severely addicted to them, and then under careful controls designed to help the conscientious citizen to kick the habit.

The principal moral burden should rest on Congress, whose past position on this subject merely proves its vulnerability to special interests. TV executives who continue to deal with this kind of advertising are beginning to appreciate the strain on their own consciences.

These mind control practices do illustrate how far the present system strays from the public interest. The disease is, however, largely an institutional one, inherent in the way that the technology is organized. We might be much better off if the broadcasting franchises, and the allotment of precious radio spectrum space, were completely severed from the production of programs.

This would establish the stations as publicly regulated utilities, like the telephone or airlines industries. They would then serve an open market of producers and audiences. The present system of licenses to integrated companies was predicated on a level of responsibility and responsiveness to the public interest that has plainly failed to meet the need. I have heard many lawyers bewail the potential hazards of more technology, and I challenge them in return to work out how to manage this one, which is so central to the life of democracy.

THESE PROPOSALS may be futile in the face of the established status quo. They also face the intrinsic biases of a broadcasting system. The present technology favors the utmost centralization of program emission, of the smallest variety, broadcast to the largest possible mass audience.

We need to favor those technological developments that can restore the widest range of choice to the consumers. Many psychiatrists believe that the format, of passive listening with zero participation, may be more harmful to personality development than the actual content of TV programs.

Some approaches to these advances have already been announced, for example, the video records developed by Peter C. Goldmark of CBS Laboratories. The Rostow committee's report on the communications industry, prepared for President Johnson, dismissed these innovations because of their probable cost. However, conventional broadcasting receives a tremendously valuable, but hidden, subsidy through the allocation of spectrum space.

Intelligent citizenship urgently needs the building of free and critical individual choice of the content of sophisticated communications. The design of future systems, and public support for the necessary research, must take account of these needs if democratic freedom is not to become hopelessly enfouled as a by-product of the deceptive cheapness of electronic communication.